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TAGS: PREL PGOV KCOR PHUM IZ
SUBJECT: PRT KIRKUK: FIRST ELECTION IN FIVE YEARS SPURS
INTENSE INTEREST

Classified By: PRT Kirkuk Team Leader Gabriel Escobar for reasons 1.4 (b) AND (b).

¶1. (U) This a PRT Kirkuk cable

¶2. (C) SUMMARY: Despite voter cynicism, ethnic tension, uncertainty about the province's future status, and electoral list fraud allegations, there is intense interest in Kirkuk in the national elections. Provincial leaders predict voter turnout of 80 percent or more. Kirkukis will likely vote along ethnic lines, but some cross-sectarian issues, including corruption, lack of essential services, and economic development, may emerge as the campaign moves forward. With a strong message, solid media outlets, and mobilized voter base, Kurdish parties are likely to do well. Among those parties, the Goran ("Change") Movement is emerging as a surprisingly competitive force, despite its recent arrival on the scene. Arab parties will likely suffer due to deep divisions along tribal lines and lack of a coherent election message. 48 prospective Arab parties have merged into 11 leading contenders, affiliated to varying degrees with national organizations. De-Ba'athification could take a toll on some local parties and lists, but no one predicts it will hurt Arab turnout. Turkomen parties are taking a tactical approach by spreading their candidates widely to gain the most representatives in the COR. After years of cynicism and political apathy (partly due to Kirkuk's not participating in the 2009 provincial elections), Kirkukis are excited about voting and may have unrealistically high expectations for the national parliamentary representatives they will elect. END SUMMARY.

PARTIES SWING INTO FULL CAMPAIGN MODE

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¶3. (SBU) Kirkuk has not participated in an election since 2005. (Note: Unresolved disputes over voter registration lists meant that Kirkuk, alone among Iraq's provinces, did not participate in the January 2009 provincial elections. End Note.) Most Kirkukis welcome the opportunity to replace the province's representatives in the national parliament, whom they largely regard as feckless, with individuals who they hope will be more responsive to their needs and more successful in prompting action by the Government of Iraq on key issues like Kirkuk's final status, property disputes, and corruption. The closed list system under which parliamentary representatives were elected in 2005 meant that voters were largely unfamiliar with their national representatives. With open lists, however, provincial leaders should be able to generate recognition more easily. Partly as a result of that, observers and party leaders expect high turnout - on the order of 80 percent or higher - across gender, social, age and ethnic lines. All parties have made an effort to put forward female candidates in the hopes they will contribute significantly to their respective party campaigns. 499 candidates - of whom 111 are women - from 28 political parties will participate.

PARTIES STILL NOT REACHING OUT ACROSS ETHNIC LINES

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¶4. (SBU) Despite early promises from most parties that they would seek to expand their voter base in Kirkuk by reaching out across ethnic lines, no party has made more than a cursory effort so far to do so. Contacts, particularly those in Goran and the Turkoman Eli party, have predicted that Kirkukis will respond to ethnically-motivated messages and largely vote along ethnic lines. Within ethnic groups, however, there is intense competition for votes, with parties focusing their secondary messages on cross-sectarian issues Qfocusing their secondary messages on cross-sectarian issues such as corruption, lack of economic development, and poor delivery of essential services.

KURDS FOCUSED ON ARTICLE 140; PUK-GORAN FEUD AN IMPORTANT VARIABLE

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¶5. (SBU) Kurdish parties will likely continue stressing implementation of Article 140 to determine Kirkuk's final status. (Note: Their expectation is that implementation of Article 140 under the Kurdish formula - normalization, followed by a census, followed by a decisional referendum - would lead to the annexation of Kirkuk to the KRG. End note.) The discussion will be heavily influenced by the KRG's largest parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Despite its relatively recent arrival and lack of established party infrastructure in the province, Goran has managed to make impressive gains in the province by criticizing the incompetence and corruption of established Kurdish parties. Goran seeks to

maintain the momentum it established with its surprisingly strong finish in the July 2009 Kurdistan Regional Government parliamentary elections, in which it outperformed the PUK in its stronghold of Suleymaniyah. Goran's gains are likely to be the PUK's losses, and the PUK's top leaders are demonstrating intense interest in Kirkuk. President Talabani spent four days in the province in January in an effort to shore up local PUK leaders. Despite the personal attention of Talabani and alleged harassment of Goran's leaders by PUK Assayesh elements, many observers, both in and out of Goran, believe that Goran could outpoll PUK in the province. "The open list is quite helpful to us and our names are very recognizable in Kirkuk," Goran candidate Awad Mohammed told PRTOffs. "The need for change will drive everyone to the polls."

ARAB PARTIES FRAGMENTED, BUT TURNOUT EXPECTED TO BE HIGH

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¶6. (SBU) Starting with 48 prospective parties, the Arabs have narrowed the field to only 11, divided between the two most prominent tribes - the Jabouris and the Obeidis. The Obeidi's highest profile candidate is the Machiavellian Ahmed Obeidi, of the Iraq Kirkuk Front (unaffiliated with any national lists and whose politics have run the gamut from moderate to extremely hard-line). Obeidi, who is on the de-Ba'athification list along with six other members of his party, could see his party's campaign unravel if his disqualification is upheld, the biggest winner among the Arabs would likely be Sheikh Hussein Ali Salih Jabouri (aka Abu Saddam), the 69-year-old Hawijah district council president. While not a candidate himself, Abu Saddam's political message focuses heavily on opposition to U.S. policy in Iraq and deep suspicion of Shi'a and Kurdish agendas, and his support is likely to help the National Dialogue Front affiliated with Saleh al-Mutlaq's movement and the al-Hal list affiliated with the Iraq Unity Alliance. While there was widespread concern that de-Ba'athification would result in renewed calls for boycotts or low participation among Sunnis, local party leaders have insisted it will not effect voter turnout, which is expected to be high. Obeidi noted that despite his potential removal, "it will not stop all of us from voting. Boycotts are not an

option unless they disqualify all of us."

TURKOMANS DIVIDE TO CONQUER (THEY HOPE)

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¶7. (SBU) Turkoman candidates are taking a tactical and coordinated approach to their campaign. Local Turkoman leaders have sought to run on as many lists as possible, in as many regions as possible - some as far away as Diyala - to avoid campaign fratricide. Their campaign message, so far, has not developed beyond soliciting support from their ethnic group. Politically, however, their views align more closely with Arab parties in their opposition to the alleged demographic changes and oppressive policies perpetrated by the Kurds in Kirkuk. Kirkuk's ITF party has allied with the National Movement Alliance (Iraqiyya), the Turkoman Eli with the Iraqi National Coalition, the Justice Party (whose candidate is running from Diyala) with Tawafiq, and the Turkoman Islamic Union with the State of Law coalition.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Kirkuk's political scene has not evolved much beyond the ethnically-motivated messages and outreach witnessed in the 2005 elections. Open lists and the expected high turnout by Sunni Arabs, however, make it likely that the results will be different, introducing a new dynamic into provincial politics. The rapid rise of Goran also partly reflects Kirkukis' desire for new messages and new parties to carry the province forward. After five years of cynicism and political apathy, the pendulum may have swung back too far the other way - voters may be setting unrealistically high expectations for the 12 national parliamentary representatives that will emerge from this election. For now, one clear theme has emerged among all voters of the province: for the residents of Kirkuk, the fight over the election law and Kirkuk's right to participate along with

other provinces was worth the effort. END COMMENT.

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